

EXHIBIT *77*

What Is Eric Adams's Plan for the Rikers Island Crisis?



A few weeks before [Eric Adams](#) took office as mayor of New York, two of his advisers, Philip Banks and Timothy Pearson, who both, like Adams, once served in the N.Y.P.D., sat down for a meal at a Queens diner with the commissioner of the Department of Correction, Vincent Schiraldi. “I think there’s a way out of this,” Schiraldi told them. “But you gotta throw down.” Schiraldi, a reformer whom Bill de Blasio plucked from a research job at Columbia University, had been commissioner for about six months. During that time, conditions

on Rikers Island—the city’s notorious jail complex in the East River, where people facing local criminal charges are sent if they can’t afford bail—had unravelled to previously unthinkable levels. Schiraldi had been digging in for battle against the correction-employee unions, whose members were calling out sick from their shifts at Rikers by the hundreds, fuelling the crisis. He wanted to stay on in the new administration—with one condition. “I’m willing to get ninety-five per cent of the blood on me,” Schiraldi told Banks and Pearson. “But five per cent is going to get on the mayor. And when that happens he’s got to say, ‘Vinny’s my guy, there’s no daylight between us.’ And if he can’t say that he shouldn’t hire me.”

Schiraldi is now back at Columbia. “He didn’t hire me,” he said, in a phone call this week.

Fourteen people died in city custody last year. For a stretch in the summer and fall, each new report out of Rikers was worse than the last. In the jail complex’s overloaded, understaffed intake areas, people languished in cells for days and weeks without reasonable access to food, bathrooms, or medical care. Violence between detainees, and between detainees and guards, rose dramatically. Suicide attempts happened so frequently that a group of local lawmakers witnessed one while taking a tour. Public defenders began [begging](#) arraignment judges to search their consciences before consigning defendants to pretrial detention. Some detainees [participated](#) in a hunger strike.

By all accounts, the city had lost control of the island—though problems at Rikers are nothing new. For decades, the island’s name has been a byword for municipal horrors, and an example of the costs of mass incarceration. Political neglect, administrative turmoil, and failed attempts at reform have been the norm. Harm to thousands has been the consequence. In 2014, my colleague Jennifer Gonnerman wrote an article for this magazine about [Kalief Browder](#), a teen-ager who spent three years languishing on Rikers after being accused of stealing a backpack. (The charges against him were eventually dismissed.) Browder died by suicide in 2015, and his experience spurred a new round of calls for change. That year, city officials [agreed](#) to the appointment of a federal monitor to oversee the jail complex. But arguments about how to improve conditions on the island continued to treat safety as zero-sum. Moves taken to improve conditions for inmates drew bitter complaints from the guards; support shown for the guards was seen as endangering inmates. In the meantime, conditions worsened.

Regaining control of the island is now largely Adams’s responsibility. Last month, at a press conference introducing Louis Molina, the man he tapped to replace Schiraldi, Adams offered a few hints as to how he wanted to proceed. First, the battle with the unions was being called off. “Hold on, what are we doing?” Adams asked, as a press aide tried to move union representatives away from the podium. “I want my unions here with me. We’re partners here.” Molina, when he spoke, chose his words carefully, acknowledging the need for changes while also making it clear that he was taking the guards’ interests into account. “The need for reform of our city jails has never been more urgent than it is now,” he said. “I will work with Mayor Adams to immediately improve conditions on Rikers Island—for correction officers *and* the incarcerated population.”

The unions applauded the appointment. “It’s a breath of fresh air,” Benny Boscio, the president of the Correction Officers’ Benevolent Association, the largest and loudest of the unions, said. “It was pretty much adversarial the last eight years.” Molina, a Bronx-born ex-Marine who served prior stints in the N.Y.P.D., the Brooklyn District Attorney’s Office, and as an official in the Department of Correction, fit perhaps the most important criteria that the rank-and-file union members were looking for in a new boss: he’s previously worn a uniform. Adams shares this affinity for the lived experience of law-enforcement agents. At the press conference, he pointed out that Molina would be the first Latino leader of the Department of Correction. “When I sat down with Louis, what touched me the most was hearing his life story,” he said. This is “one of the most significant appointments I can make.”

Yet beyond de-escalating the situation with the unions, the Adams administration's plan for Rikers is still mostly undefined. Adams has expressed support for the use of solitary confinement—another of the unions' top priorities—which he argues is necessary as a deterrent against violence in the jails, despite evidence of the harmful effects solitary has on those forced to endure it. He has also promised to address critical physical-plant issues on Rikers, such as broken doors and locks. Molina said that his first order of business would be a “thorough assessment” of the department's operations. “We've done too many quick fly-by-night solutions to get things done,” he said. “That's not how I'm going to operate.”

A particularly bedevilling aspect of the Rikers crisis, in terms of a public-policy debate, is that the problems in New York's jails have compounded at a time when the system's population is down to about a quarter of what it was at its height, in the nineteen-nineties. The city has a jails crisis even as it's decarcerating. This is partly explained by the [pandemic](#), which exposed and exacerbated long-standing problems on Rikers, as it did everywhere else. But reformers also point to an uptick in the prison population that preceded this summer's chaos, when judges began to set more bail amid a political backlash against the state's new, progressive bail reforms. The unions say that they've been dealing with a smaller but more “hardened” jail population. Last month, a [comprehensive report](#) in the *Times* attempted to cut through the debate, showing how mismanagement and political neglect for decades weakened correctional staff's authority in the jail system. “As a result, guards have been posted throughout the system in wasteful and capricious ways, generous benefits like sick leave have been abused and detainees have had the run of entire housing areas,” the reporters Jan Ransom and Bianca Pallaro wrote.

In 2017, de Blasio put his support behind a plan to close Rikers by 2027 and replace it with a network of smaller jails around the city. Adams says that he supports the broad strokes of that plan. But he has also noted that even a successful rollout would keep Rikers in operation for another five years. Can it be fixed in the meantime? No one can say for sure. Boscio told me, “We believe it is salvageable with the right policies and the right people in charge,” which is as optimistic an assessment as you'll hear from anyone. In a statement, Molina, who worked as an official for the Westchester County Department of Correction when it came out from under a federal monitorship, told me, “I have led successful transformations of jail systems before and know that together, we can build a department that keeps officers and those in our care safe.”

In an interview, Boscio blamed the mass absences that have plagued the Department of Correction this year on the pandemic, overwork, injuries, and mismanagement. “This notion that we're against reform is just untrue,” he said. “But reform can't be one-sided.” When I asked him what measures his union believed would improve conditions on the island, he rattled off a list that pretty much matched what Adams has proposed: the use of solitary confinement, fixing physical-plant issues, and abandoning the practice of housing gang members by affiliation. He also said that the department needed to hire more staff, raised suspicions about the deal to close Rikers—“it's four hundred acres of waterfront property that they want”—and lamented the way that his union had been portrayed in the media. “The reality is eighty-five per cent of us are minority,” he said. “Sixty-five per cent of us still live in New York, and come from the same neighborhoods the inmates are from.”